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Two Ends of the Emblem

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This article focuses on the wider contexts within which emblems exist in Western pictorial practices. Emblems represent a high point of organization and systematization in Western pictorial practice, and in that regard they are parallel to heraldry, to some traditions of mapmaking, and to coded systems such as scientific, theological, and mystical schemata. Because they are so highly structured they also have a tendency to deliquesce: to melt into the surrounding image practices, gradually losing their attributes one after another until nothing much is left of them except the memory of what they once were.

Parenthetically, emblems can also ramify, becoming more and more intricate instead of less so, and that tendency leads toward such things as alchemical “emblems”—with the word in quotation marks—by which is meant complicated verbal and visual assemblages that are not meant to be read with any finality. Heinrich Khunrath’s astonishingly complex inventions are an example.¹ But for the most part, emblems melt away rather than continue their crystallization. If part of the wider history of emblems is that process of melting into neighboring forms of image making and writing, then there may be tendencies, if not laws and genres, that can help describe their dissolution, and in theory those tendencies could become the subjects of an expanded field of emblem studies.

1. See Khunrath. An example is analyzed in my book *What Painting Is*.

The topic of interest here is distinguished from the use of emblems as sources for paintings. Emblems were often adapted, and used in paintings, and those paintings tend to lack the *inscriptio*, *subscriptio*, and other textual elements that once served as explanatory frames for the image itself. The subject here is more nebulous but even more broadly significant: it is the emblem-like nature of certain pictures, especially when no link to an emblem book can be shown, or would even be expected. It is the *idea* of emblems that counts here as the source of the practice, not the adoption of one or another specific motif or iconography.

To some degree this subject under discussion is by its nature unencompassable, because any slightly enigmatic-looking picture in the post-Renaissance Western tradition could be said to reverberate, however faintly, with the sense of the secret value of the image that Western humanists inherited from Renaissance speculations about hieroglyphs, and that Baroque humanists would have readily associated with the puzzles in emblem books.

This problem is symmetrical with Creighton Gilbert's old argument that Renaissance landscape paintings that ostensibly have no subject—the "not subject," the painting with no obvious narrative, historical, religious, or symbolic meaning—may have been conceived in the Renaissance, but individual paintings were not understood that way.² They were seen as specific landscapes, or particular arrangements of figures. As Salvatore Settis's book demonstrates, Giorgione's *Tempesta* seemed mysterious mainly to nineteenth- and twentieth-century observers. It has been persuasively argued that it did not seem to lack a subject to Renaissance viewers. The fascination with the "not-subject" is our own—it pertains to the second half of the twentieth century, and it is probably best understood as a symptom of modernism. Still, that does not mean that emblem books did not cast a spell over painters' practices, helping them to conceive of pictures that do not quite make sense.

The diffusion of emblems into the broader pictorial practices of post-Renaissance painting is by its nature an impossible subject. The contribution here is limited to two simple hypotheses, which

2. See Gilbert. This is analyzed in my book *Why are Our Pictures Puzzles?*, 127-29.

are demonstrated using two very different sets of examples. These are the “ends of the emblem” of the title.

First, emblems can *fragment*: the *inscriptio*, *subscriptio*, accompanying verses or texts, and the image can all fall to pieces, as it were, and form a new and ultimately illogical configuration. This was already a possibility in the High Renaissance, as demonstrated by Dürer’s prints of heraldic elements gone askew: the image of a man and woman in front of an enormous naturalistic heraldic shield, or one of the elements of the shield standing by itself in a landscape.

Emblems can also *become pictorial*: they can lose their accompanying legends and texts, and become independent pictures. When that happens, the naturalistic backgrounds that are common in emblem images become suddenly meaningful. The grassy fields, rivers, mountains, forests, and interiors whose only purpose had been to serve as decoration, or *staffage*, for the symbolic forms in the emblem images, become significant in their own right. They need to be elaborated and expanded, and at the same time the symbolic figures, animals, and objects need to find their ways *into* the landscapes or interiors, and take their places as apparently natural objects.

The Fragmentation of the Emblem

The fragmentation of the emblem, and the mixing of texts with images, is well exemplified by certain neoexpressionist painters who have now suffered something of a decline, including Julian Schnabel and Francesco Clemente.

It is possible to outline the main tendencies of fragmentation. Schnabel, for example, often works with images that are juxtaposed with fragments of text, as in *St. S* (1988). His massive pieces *War* and *Peace* are of that sort; one has a kind of “alpha and omega” reference to it, and an unfocused reference to the Beast in *Revelations*, but otherwise they are curiously empty—the “curious” pointing to something schematic, symbolic, or emblematic.

In the 1980s, Salle used “emblematic” words as overlays on a wide variety of apparently disconnected images, as in *Tennyson*

(1983), which juxtaposes a nude with patterns and the word “TENNYSON.” Schnabel sometimes did the same, as with a series that depicts religious themes on banners; the canvases themselves are approximately cross-shaped, and the luminous forms are arranged in apparently meaningful patterns, but nothing emerges as a definitive meaning.

As a means of clarification, here are three modernist practices that are *not* directly descended from emblems.

1. Some contemporary art that makes use of fragments of heraldry, as in paintings of logos that were popular in the art world in the late 1980s. The “logos” clearly came from corporate logos, which are themselves often simplified coats of arms, and such paintings combined words and images in uncertain ways.
2. There is also a tradition that descends from the mid-twentieth-century fascination with hieroglyphs and writing systems, as in Adolf Gottlieb’s work. There is a connection to emblemata here because Gottlieb’s “pictographs” are derived, at several removes, from the ongoing Western fascination with hieroglyphs. But the mystical symmetries that fascinated Gottlieb can be best understood as *fin-de-siècle* tendencies, as in paintings by Ferdinand Hodler, Egon Schiele, and others.
3. Modern “fragmented emblems” can also be distinguished from work done by the first-generation abstract painters, such as Kandinsky, which can seem heraldic or emblematic, but is more involved with the geometrization and simplification of what were taken as natural forms.

Now these practices exemplified by Salle, Schnabel, neo-expressionism or transavantguardia, have a deeper history: they go back to surrealism, and through it to Dada collage. Although lineages can be traced—even in cases like logo painting, or Gottlieb’s simplified *Ur*-symbols—such lineages are less interesting, in the end, than the indirect and pervasive evidence of the dissolution of emblemata in the wider practices of visual art.

The Disintegration of the Emblem

The second tendency in the dissemination and disintegration of emblems springs from the idea of taking the image from the emblem, omitting the texts, and elaborating on the image until it be-

comes an independent work of art. Presented here as an example is one of the most amazing manuscripts the author has ever seen, an anonymous late-seventeenth-century manuscript in the Ferguson collection in Glasgow.³

Before we turn to this manuscript, let us first explore the history of this second way that emblems dissolve. Unlike the first, this one was inherent in emblems from the outset. It is explicit in deliberately enigmatic title pages and frontispieces, such as those associated with Jacob Boehme, Athanasius Kircher, and less famously—but just as interestingly—with writers such as the alchemist known as Abraham Eleazer.⁴ In alchemical and mystical texts, it is fairly common to find images that are developed without surrounding text of any kind, as in Johann Daniel Mylius' *Philosophia Reformata*.⁵ A full history of this phenomenon would have to take into account the emblematic images embedded in books like Cartari's, where the explanations spread throughout the accompanying texts.⁶

The Glasgow manuscript is a small book in a brown binding. It has a title page, and after that there are only pictures—52 of them. They are in watercolor, and they vary in size from 110 to 130 centimeters in diameter. (While the Ferguson collection is not related to the Stirling Maxwell collection of emblem books, it does not appear to be coincidental that this manuscript is held today at the Glasgow University Library, which is home to the world's pre-eminent emblem collection.)

There is a little secret about the book, which is not hard to discover: each painting is modeled on the cut section of a tree trunk. One person to whom I showed this manuscript said the artist might have used petrified wood, on account of the gleaming colors

3. The University of Glasgow MS Ferguson 115. In my manuscript "What Heaven Looks Like," I argue it is one of the masterpieces of its time, and that its author had emblems on his or her mind.
4. See, for example, Eleazer's 1735 *Uraltes Chymisches WERCK*.
5. I mention Mylius' book because it was so often reproduced. A simpler and even more widely studied example is Jacob Saulet's 1677 *Mutus liber*.
6. Cartari 1625. The editions of Cartari have a tendency to invent new pictorial forms—a freedom granted, I would say, by the looseness of the accompanying text. See, for example, Cartari 1963.

in some pictures. The round format necessitated by the material of the paintings strongly suggests the round emblems typical of many seventeenth-century artists, such as Crispin de Passe's rondels for Gabriel Rollenhagen (1611, 1613).⁷ Wood is almost the only secret the book gives away, and that is about all that can be said at first look. The paper was made in Holland, toward the end of the seventeenth century. The artist may have lived in that century, or in the beginning of the next: the style tells us as much. But he or she could have lived in Italy, France, Holland, or even England. To conjure the book, this article will examine seven illustrations, barely enough to show just how amazing this manuscript is, and how much it deserves to be fully reprinted.

On the title page (fig. 1), in clear Latin script, is the only writing in the book. In the English translation:

Work of Natural Magic, in which the Miracles of Pneumo-cosmic Nature are Painted with a Brush. Fully engraved by an Ape of Nature, following Nature's universal Catholic Prototype, and dedicated to the eternal memory of the king.

It is a little odd that the writer says the work is painted, and then immediately afterward says it was engraved, or modeled in relief (the word is *ectypus*). Perhaps it was intended to be engraved, but it is also possible that the writer is thinking of the origin of the images in natural engraving—in living wood.

This artist is expert in suspending judgment (fig. 2). Are we looking through opened clouds to a heavenly city? Or out of a cave—where we may have gone to hide, or to pray in solitude—back to the town from which we came? Or through a forest at a distant village? Or even—in the harsh, literal manner so fashionable in current criticism—through a womb, or into one?

Around the outside things get dark, as if to say we are in a hole within a hole, or peering out of one dream and into another. The artist loved these abysses, in which dreams jerk into waking life, or collapse into nightmares. We rarely know where we are, and when there is a foothold something on the margins is usually waiting to pull us away, or push us back into the deepest recess of a

7. I thank Mara Wade for this suggestion; the example is hers.

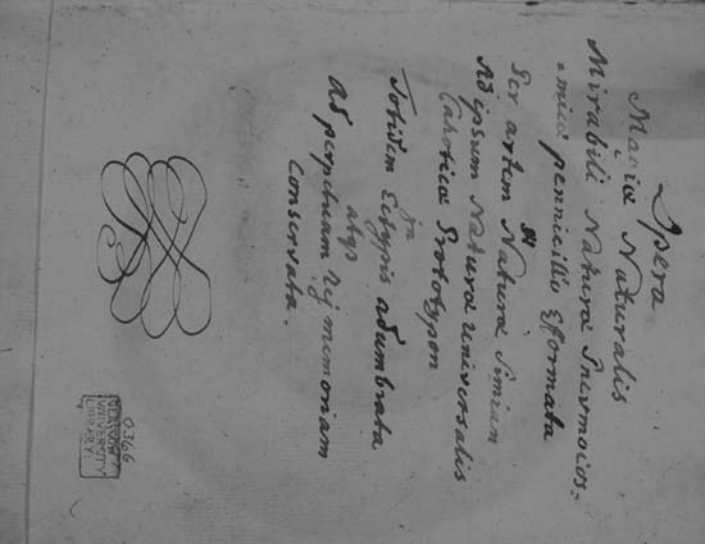


Fig. 1. Unknown artist, *Opera magica naturalis*. . . MS Ferguson 115, title page (Photo courtesy of Glasgow University Library.)

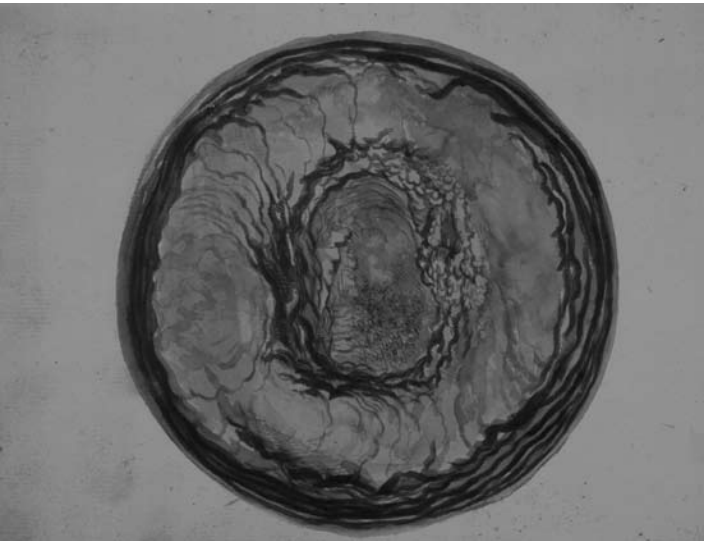


Fig. 2. Unknown artist, *Opera magica naturalis*. . . MS Ferguson 115, fol. 1 (Photo courtesy of Glasgow University Library.)



Fig. 3. Unknown artist, *Opera magia naturalis*. . . MS Ferguson 115, fol. 16 (Photo courtesy of Glasgow University Library.)

cave within a cave, within a cloud inside a dream.

The city is small in the distance, but it attracts our attention. There is not much to it: outlines of buildings, perhaps city walls and a gate. In front are a few block-like forms. The clouds are full, and rain may be falling. Viewers have sometimes recognized Giorgione's painting called *The Tempest*, which also has a city in the distance, ruins on the left, a grove of trees at the right, and a threatening storm. It is tempting to link this picture to that famous one, but Giorgione's painting was almost forgotten until

Romantic viewers revived it in the nineteenth century. Our artist may well have seen other Venetian landscapes, and felt an affinity with their half-ruined buildings and deserted pastures.

Occasionally the painter meditates on specific and obscure narratives, which he or she cannot find in the wood (fig. 3). When that happens, the artist just paints them as if they were ordinary round paintings, and overlays the bark and grain from the cut sections. The wood nudges the stories a little, prompting her or him to add details here and there, but mostly the stories are painted on the wood rather than seen in it. In a sense this is not playing the game: but it is pleasing to the viewer that the painter loves stories without explanations (fig. 3).

This one is almost the Biblical story of Tobit, the young man who brought a miraculous fish back to cure his father's blindness. In the Bible, Tobit is accompanied by an angel, and painters usu-

ally show him walking with the fish, or applying the fish to his father's eyes. But really it is not Tobit at all. The man who holds the fish (at the far right) is short and old, and the figure who would be the angel (just left of center) has a fat companion (at the far left). This is a meeting between two figures and two peasants, one of whom has a large fish. It is like a dream, conflating the story of Tobit with the story of the Three Magi. In typical dream logic, one Magus has disappeared, and Tobit and his father greet two angels at once.

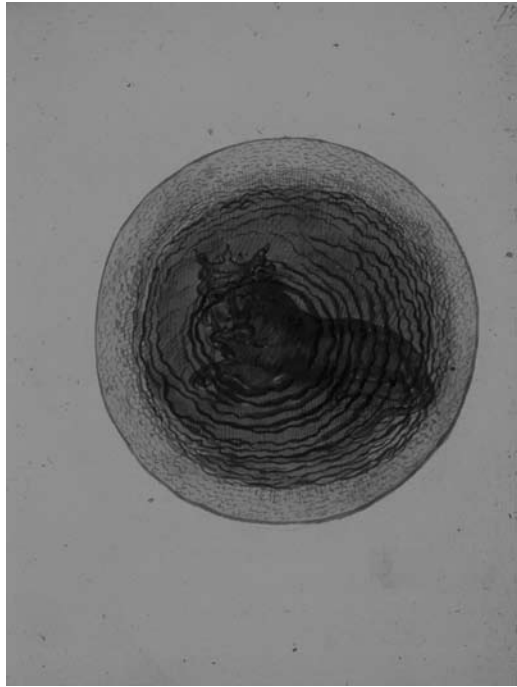


Fig. 4. Unknown artist, *Opera magia naturalis* . . . MS Ferguson 115, fol. 17 (Photo courtesy of Glasgow University Library.)

Much of this book is dreamlike, and people who have seen it have proposed that it is all the records of dreams. No doubt the artist was attentive to dreams: who could produce such paintings without thinking of daydreams, reveries, and hallucinations of all kinds? But most scenes in the book are very exactly observed, and they are the results of protracted meditation on what the wood reveals. As artists know, simple transcriptions of dreams are disappointing—they tend to look hazy and conventional. The stark black band that confines these figures is not what the artist saw in a dream, but what the wood did to his or her memory. And the little old man who floats there with his fish may even have been seen in the wood, and not in a dream.

For a person like this artist, spending months and possibly years in an activity so bizarre that it was probably secret even from his

or her family, staring at the cut sections of logs for days on end, letting his or her visions unfold into shapes and stories utterly unprecedented in their deep irrationality—for such a person, would there be a clear distinction between seeing, thinking, dreaming, and hallucinating (fig. 4)?

A crowned lion with a snake in its mouth is a standard alchemical symbol, the most conventional one in the book. It can mean several things, most commonly an advanced stage in the alchemical work very close to the achievement of the Philosopher's Stone. Needless to say, in alchemical treatises it is never covered with rippling tree rings.

It is just barely conceivable that this artist might have shown his or her work to fellow alchemists. There are some alchemical books that are little more than long series of round paintings, depicting in symbolical fashion the contents of the alchemist's flask in each successive stage. The shorter series can be helpful for novices, but the longer series (some with as many as eighty pictures) are far too confusing and repetitive ever to yield any insight. If our artist did intend this book as a kind of visual manual (and there were such books, written entirely without explanations or captions) then this would be a bit of firm ground in the quaking bog of uncertainties.

But real alchemical books are very formulaic: kings and queens, swans, tigers, lions, fountains, moons, suns, and chemical symbols come and go in endless alternation. This book is far more rich, willful, free, and circumspect. If it is an alchemical treatise, it is the most obscure one ever written (or, as the alchemists would have said, the deepest, the most profound). Here it is interpreted more as a diary, a prolonged search for images that might fit the artist's wayward thoughts.

Here, looking deep into a murky pool—or dreaming of looking into one—the painter sees a crowned lion instead of his or her own reflection.

Dreams move, but hallucinations, mirages, and objects of meditation stay put. As long as they are before the eye (or the mind's eye) they sit still, as if they were framed pictures or sculptures. An object of constant meditation burns into the retina, and begins to shine with meanings.

Like the previous image, this exceedingly beautiful painting (fig. 5) shows us a single object, frozen permanently into its wooden matrix. Like a strange insect trapped in amber, it is there whenever we want to peer at it, but it can never be released. To this artist's contemporaries, it would also have looked like a natural wonder, the kind collected in curiosity cabinets—a deformed pig, a prehistoric insect, an incomparable fossil.

And what is it? The front half of a lamb, with its legs stretched out as back, its body is captured by sheets of birch bark. The bark case-ment swathes the lamb's neck, giving it a thick collar, and dangles down under its belly. In back the lamb's body shrivels, and the rolls of birch paper tatter and hang in the air.

Or we may think of it the other way around: a tangle of birch-paper shreds rolls itself into a lamb, and the head and legs pop out the front.

This could well be a natural wonder, something to exercise a philosopher or a theologian. It is also possible that this painting would have reminded its maker of an emblem: a puzzling picture like a crowned lion chewing on a snake. Since this wonder was found in the artist's imagination and not in a lump of amber, it is also an emblem of the artist's thoughts.

As an emblem, what does it mean? Surely the lamb is always first and foremost Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. And wood, in

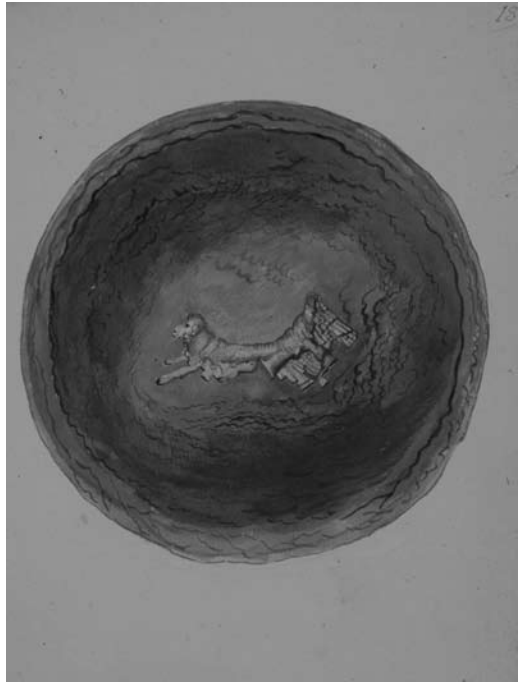


Fig. 1. Unknown artist, *Opera magia naturalis* . . . MS Ferguson 115, fol. 18 (Photo courtesy of Glasgow University Library.)



Fig. 6. Unknown artist, *Opera magia naturalis*. . . MS Ferguson 115, fol. 19 (Photo courtesy of Glasgow University Library.)

light from the darkness. Here again is a snake, larger and more sinister than before. It cowers before God, and so it must be the Devil. Before the first day of creation, God had to subjugate evil, and he does that here. The Devil is also—on the hidden, esoteric plane—the alchemical snake, called the ouroboros, symbol of volatility and self-destruction. For an alchemist Jesus becomes the lodestone, and the snake the uncertain creeping element of life.

The picture has at least these two meanings, both of them strong and almost doctrinaire: first, God struggles with evil; second, the principle of eternity struggles with the principle of transience. Even though the picture is unique (no other painting with these elements is known), it is more ordinary in its obviousness than any other in the book. Perhaps the artist is trying to think something through, and in fact this painting is the first of a series of five that tell the painter's version of the story of creation.

this context, is always the wood of the True Cross. For as long as it is possible to believe that this image is under the artist's control, and that it means only one thing, it is bound to be the mystery of the incarnation. But that moment does not last long.

At last (fig. 6), an unmistakable figure: God. For the first time, the ambiguously open center is filled unambiguously. But where is he? This is probably Chaos, or the turmoil of the first moments of creation. Possibly, God is about to separate the

This snake practically encompasses the picture, or it would if God had not made it snivel. The artist lets its tail deliquesce into the round circumference, so it is not clear just how long it is, but probably, if it stretched itself out and pressed its body into the circle, its head would touch its tail in a perfect circle—the shape of the *ouroboros*.

At this time there are folk tales of snakes holding their tails in their mouths and rolling down hills; they are the docile cousins of the alchemical snake, which actually devours itself, starting with the tip of the tail and ending, impossibly, with its own head. The artist toys with the idea. In this scene the *ouroboros* is made to break its vicious circle, and melt its body into the background.

Sometimes (fig. 7) this manuscript abruptly plunges the viewer into a world more alien than anything imaginable. An undulating valley cradles a disembodied head, like an egg in an egg-cup. Off to one side, embedded in a watery hillside, a swaddled child looks on and smiles faintly. He is wan, and may be sickly, and his smile looks insincere or a bit desperate.

The big head seems dull and harmless: perhaps it is befuddled or slightly dimwitted. It has a drinker's red nose, and a puppy's lips. If the viewer looks only at this head, the image may almost seem comforting and placid. But look anywhere else, and it turns sour, like a dream where everything begins to seem ominous. The big head has a floppy hairdo, which springs up on each side like



Fig. 7. Unknown artist, *Opera magia naturalis*. . . MS Ferguson 115, fol. 31 (Photo courtesy of Glasgow University Library.)

a dog's ears. But on closer inspection the hair is continuous with a reddish bulge on the horizon. Some people who have seen this picture think the bulge is the setting sun, but if the hair continues on backward, the bulge might be an engorged body, swelling up behind the head. The big head may be the front end of another legless, armless larva, this one lying on its belly.

There is no way to decide where the two larvae are. The landscape may be a dry valley, or one of the sloshing ocean coves so beloved of seventeenth-century Neapolitan painters. If it is water, the little round white forms might be other larvae carried along by the current. Water or rock, it frays at the right, and unravels into hair.

A millipede makes its way across the lower margin, its many legs moving in a sinuous rhythm. Perhaps the infant is looking affectionately at it. A stain also crosses the scene, passing invisibly through the big head and swelling into another ghostly larva that hovers between the two others.

What words could possibly describe this scene of idiotic paralysis? It is a prodigious picture, with a pummeling strangeness that is enough to put the Surrealists to shame. In the end, of course, no explanation will do. It is a silent universe where little pupas with almost human faces rest quietly, some on their stomachs and some propped up. Occasionally they exchange sweet empty smiles.

This is the wager proposed by this article: that these paintings—some of them, the best, certainly not all—will have a grip on the imagination that will not easily be loosened. After living with pictures like these, it will be hard to go back to the Madonnas and Children and Hercules and Venuses and Adonises who say what they mean and mean what they say. Pictures with titles will seem too easy, too obvious. Pictures with messages will seem misguided.

Clearly, paintings exist, in part, in order not to make sense. This anonymous late-seventeenth-century artist is not modern in the sense that he or she fits with Man Ray or Max Ernst; this painter is modern in the ways he or she occludes the clear subjects that she or he might have painted. If that means making God the Father into a green specter, or stretching a lamb into a dome and pasting on a puppy's head, she or he does it. The only limit is what the artist can bear to see on the page.

We are attracted to paintings before we know what they are supposed to mean, and their wordlessness continues to draw us toward them, even though we often forget in our rush to find their sense and purpose. People who write about art can be uneasy about this: they know they are fascinated by the parts that do not make sense, but they also feel the pull of meaning. There is a good reason, in the end, why I will lose this wager: every paint-



ing has its quotient of wordlessness, and the titles and narratives of

major paintings can often be understood as decoys—as the expected tags that ostentatiously fail to explain much of anything. Still, there are certain frames of mind in which it is essential to see that a painter knows pictures are not texts, and this manuscript answers to that temperament as well as any artwork I know (fig. 8).

In this final scene, a naked young woman sits on the familiar garden bench. She has just turned to see something that is outside the picture. A few yards away a young man is sitting quietly, looking up into a cloudy sky. They could have had names, and they could have been looking at each other or at us. They do not, and there is no reason why they do not. We might have been told what each of them sees, or what they think. We will never know. That is the pure pleasure of this painting, and the pleasure of pictures that have the flavor of emblems—that come, by strange routes that cannot be discovered by iconographic sleuthing, out of the world

Fig. 8. Unknown artist, *Opera magia naturalis* . . . MS Ferguson 115, fol. 52 (Photo courtesy of Glasgow University Library.)

of emblems and into the wider world in which every picture is, hopefully, something of a mystery.

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